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Sacrament Sunday



SACRAMENT SUNDAY

BY

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My native land, a debt of song I pay—
A debt of love that lieth on my soul,
When memory draws the veil of by-gone day,
And olden music greets the lifting scroll.
A tribute to thy freedom's faith I bring ;
The piety that scents thy glebe I sing ;
Thy purple hills whose silver mists unroll
The waving gold of dawn ; thy lowing plains
And hawthorn banks and braes, where hamlet meekness reigns.

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SACRAMENT SUNDAY.



In lowland vale, the dearest far to me,
Where nature hums as in a mead of flowers,
I hear the sweet-lipped chimes arouse the lea,
And wake its slow response to Sabbath hours.
Within, the drowsy echoes find retreat :
Without, the murmurings of springtide meet,
Where cloistered brook sings in its nearer bowers,
Till seems it, as if nature would begin
An anthem in my being, ushering Easter in.

Of Sabbath morns, the precious of the year,
Thy sweetness maketh meek the landscape's face,
And from the dews of prayer distils a tear,
To scent the heart, a chamber fit for grace.
Where leads its course the soul oft wisteth not,
When faith turns down the bridle-path of doubt,
That winds about so oft a hapless maze ;
Yet, ere thy paschal chimes have died away,
Truth's highway broadens as it finds the sheen of day.

On wing of dawn new light illumines the soul,
And wrestles with the world creeping in,
While conscience reads, alarmed, the memory-scroll
Of motives sabled by the breath of sin.
Alas ! how strength is weakness in the strife,
We find within the narrowness of life !
How can the soul be shriven amid the din ?
Not till it seeks its foster-strength in love,
Not till it finds, through faith, a wisdom from above.

The sombre homestead, cowering in its nest,
One day in seven, unheeds king rooster's call,
But waits the clarion claims from spire addressed
To break the gossamer bonds of dreamland's thrall.
Yet, ere the dew hath lost its lingering drops,
The smoke comes winding from the chimney tops,
To signal me within the boundary wall,—
Or others warn the homeward path to take,
To greet the sounds of duty that are now awake.

Such respite-rest to all the world owes,
And stint of toil enhances Sunday fare ;
As round the frugal board the family shows
A cheerful meekness void of secular care.
From worldly themes the converse turns away,
Though thoughts are busy with approaching day—
With friends and neighbours who will soon repair,
A wistful throng, to celebrate the hour,
When Christian power, from sleep of death, arose to power.

And, thanks returned, the simple record's read
How once the Son of Man atoned for man,
More wondrous still, how rose He from the dead,
That hopes immortal mortal love might fan.
And from the family altar prayers ascend,
That conscience, finding peace in faith, would end
The day in peace, as only conscience can,—
And that the elect would find communion sweet,
Around the table where their privilege 'tis to meet.

The poor have little need for sumptuous laws,
To bridle pride or love for dress impair,
Yet, ben the house, the young folk seek their braws,
That seldom ken as yet a week-day wear.
If there's distress that thrift hath never borne,
How doubly poor's the thrift, on Sunday morn,
That hath no second better garb to air
In God's own house : and so both old and young
Adorn themselves, as best they may, to join the throng.

The hour draws near, at last the bells ring out,
And echo answers from the solemn streets,
As pass the worshippers with mien devout,
To hear the story that their heart repeats.
To worship God ! nay more with Him to feast !
The emblems of His body's passion taste !
And with the chimes the hum of life retreats
Across the glebe, beyond the grass-hid mounds,
Where saintship marks its rest within the church's bounds.

Within the sacred courts the snow-white lines,
A space reserved, mark where the faithful meet ;
Then cometh pause, when once the bell resigns
Its claim to call. Each solemn wales a seat.
The pastor and his friend from parish near,
With measured pace, in central aisle appear
As regents of the feast. The elders seek retreat
Within the pulpit's shade ; till " Let us sing,"
In presence of the throne of God, the faithful bring.

The sermon o'er, appropriate for the day,
The warrant read, a law for good and ill—
What joy it is, a guest prepared, to stay ;
What judgment 'tis, if unrepentant still.
Then silence seeks anew to sift the heart :
Its subtle rhythm, far beyond all art
Of anthem-power, hath in it music's thrill :
Is man the Holy Place, where finds he grace,
Within its waking awe, his destiny to trace ?

A blessing craved, as first the feast was blessed,
The patriarch-elders pass the emblems round,—
The bread, the token of the world's unrest,
The wine, the token of redemption found.
The frailties of the flesh each sad reviews,
The covenant-pledges broken each renews,
Still seeking good within,—a higher ground,
What is't to find ? Can man e'er reach the goal ?
Is it to do or be that purifies the soul ?

Faith courage takes, assurance comes of faith,
And, prayer-becalmed, the pastor's friend draws near,
To tell how love can conquer sin and death,
And sanctify the soul through faith-girt fear.
'Betray it not, nor yet thyself betray,'
The preacher saith, 'Avoid the world's way ;
With guidance from the truth thy path is clear :
Though narrow is its course, it leadeth straight,
Where peace and happiness the pilgrim's end await.'

The youthful of the flock have wondering seen
The mystery of the feast. They know in part ;
For who is wise to know what all may mean ?
Who can attain true purity of heart ?
'Tis theirs to join in praise with pure-eyed mirth,
Receive the blessing, and discern the worth
Of righteous dealing ; theirs to learn the art
From piety matured,—God's flock in sooth,
Though timorous as yet, to watch the ways of truth !

And then at length along the waking aisles,
Solemnity apace, all wend their way,—
The younger first, in haste for out-door wiles,
The older soon to bid them mind the day.
Friend greeteth friend in sober words and kind,
A converse fitting for the day they find ;
While some, with miles to go, yet fain to stay,
To hear at eve the helper's eloquence,
Have instant pressing welcome to their neighbour's spence.

In time dispersed, home duties them await,
The interval delayed, thrift urgeth haste ;
Some seek the byres, some pass a-field the gate,
To seek report of flocks or straying beast.
The housewife and her handmaids have their cares,
As each her portion of the meal prepares,
The auld man, thinking less to-day of waste
Than plenty for his waiting guests, moves round,
To urge a sitting down as soon as things are found.

Nor of the day do they for long forget,
As round the table all have ta'en their place :
The tribulations that the saints beset,
The judgments fallen on men for lack of grace.
The doctrines of the sectaries, false and true,
The watchwords of the churches, old and new,
Reforms of eld, both orthodox and base,
The seniors sore discuss ; while still the young,
In admiration of the lore, restrain their tongue.

Yet even they to purpose converse hold,
Belyve outside the steading on the green,
Of pastor-prophets, virtued pure as gold,
Of prowess for the faith in battle seen.
Of sect-craft, and the ties of church and state
They hesitate to talk, but fond relate
The tales of church-romance ; for well I ween
The record of the martyrs they have known,
Since e'er their pride awoke, to prize the land their own.

And then, from far and near, as sinks the sun,
The country-side assembles, keen to hear
The helpmate preacher. Service elsewhere done,
The sympathies of sect may disappear.
The venerated walls enclose a throng
Who lift their voices in the sacred song,
“ All people that on earth.” How stirring, clear
The grand old chorus is when thus enchoired !
How from a thousand hearts the words ring out inspired !

Nor is there need to linger o’er the scene,
No need to tell what words the preacher found
To stir his hearers’ hearts. The tears between
The joys aroused, to tell were empty sound,
Compared to what was felt. And yet renewed,
Such scenes reveal the mystery of the good
In God and us : by them is ever crowned
The fading glory of the human that’s divine :
Through them the good and true becometh thine and mine.

Yes, thine and mine, my friend ; and who shall dare
With ruthless hand from us such memories steal ?
Who from the past its fringe of sweetness tear,
As narrowness its giddy joys reveal ?
Our lives are God's, not ours, to make or mar ;
Our loyalty is His, in country near or far :
Our homes are His, within His commonweal ;
And lingering o'er the scenes of bygone time
Makes, more and more, both here and there, our lives sublime.







